

# How I Killed Stamp Collecting



I am in possession of a colorful envelope postmarked 18 December 2016, Sacramento, CA which sports seven commemorative stamps from earlier days of the United States of America. "No cookie nibbled by a French novelist could send one into the past more suddenly -.."<sup>1</sup>



This 8-cent Henry Tanner commemorative stamp was first placed on sale at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on September 10, 1973. This stamp was the third of four in the American Arts Series issued in 1973. African American artist Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) faced racism due to his career path and consequently moved to France, hoping that the French would judge his art for art's sake and not look at the color of his skin. Despite this, Tanner still returned to the US for art exhibitions and is considered to be the first notable

African-American painter in US history. The stamp was designed by Mark English and was issued in sheets of forty, with an initial printing of 150 million. Compare this release number with the Christmas stamp, below.

<sup>1</sup> from *The Lanyard* by Billy Collins

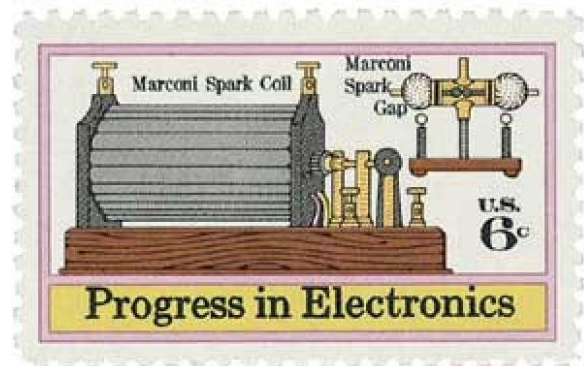


The 5-cent Accomplishments In Space commemorative stamps, issued September 29, 1967, depict a space-walking astronaut linked to a Gemini capsule. The issue itself, the first two-stamp single design ever released by the United States, depicts the spacewalk successfully completed during Project Gemini. See the US flag in the design?



Lee's ancestral home. This stamp represents one of the few instances in which military leaders who bore arms against the United States have been featured on a U.S. postage stamp.

This 6 cent stamp was issued in 1973 to celebrate progress in Electronics. The stamp shows a Marconi's Spark Coil and Spark Gap. The Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi used a spark-gap transmitter in his experiments to develop the radio phenomenon into a wireless telegraphy system in the early 1890s. In 1895 he succeeded in transmitting over a distance of 1 1/4 miles. His first transmitter consisted of an induction coil connected between a wire antenna and ground, with a spark gap across it. Every time the induction coil pulsed, the antenna was momentarily charged up to tens (sometimes hundreds) of thousands of volts until the spark gap started to arc. This acted as a switch, essentially connecting the charged antenna to ground and producing a brief burst of electromagnetic radiation.



This 1959 10¢ Pan-Am Games airmail stamp marks the opening of the Pan-American Games of 1959 at Chicago, Illinois and was issued there on Bonnie's 15th birthday: 27 August 1959. Some 2,263 athletes from 18 countries participated in the 3rd Pan-Am Games. The stamp was issued for use on airmail letters headed to Central and South America.

Who doesn't love Currier & Ives? Well, this ain't it. This 6-cent Christmas postage stamp was first placed on sale at the town of Christmas, Florida, on November 3, 1969. Reproduced on the stamp is a winter scene of bygone days by an unknown artist.

The painting is titled "Winter Sunday in Norway, Maine." It is oil on canvas painted about 1870 and now in the collection of the New York State Historical Association. The stamp was issued in panes of fifty with



an initial printing of 1.6 billion. With a B. So not that rare. But pretty. Currier & Ives?



**8¢ Pharmacy** stamp commemorates the 120th anniversary of the American Pharmaceutical Association and pays tribute to more than 100,000 druggists. The stamp pictures a mortar and pestle, Bowl of Hygieia, and 19th century medicine bottles. Hygieia was the Greek goddess of health. Hygieia holding a patera (medicine bowl) with a snake coiling

around her and about to eat from the bowl has come to symbolize pharmacy. The snake represents the patient and its choice of whether or not to take the medicine to help itself. The American Pharmacists Association has adopted the Bowl of Hygieia as its symbol.

Now, you enjoyed that little description of the stamps, right? So why would anyone give up these (previously) mint-condition stamps? Gary Ganong explains his action as follows:

I was a stamp collector as a youth. My father enjoyed stamps and encouraged me to collect them. I would only collect cancelled stamps because I was very frugal and they were the most affordable.

My father collected stamps his whole life. Our bubble was broken when the Post Office decided to replace the traditional stamps (which were licked to apply, like envelopes) with adhesive stamps. The hobby suddenly became passé. Adhesive stamps cannot be removed from their backing easily so there is no great market in cancelled adhesive stamps.

Plate blocks were the four stamps in the corner with the serial number of the sheet. The Post Office started putting the serial number on several segments of the sheet so the plate block became more than four stamps.

Some collectors made small fortunes by acquiring a sheet of misprints from the Post Office. Certain socialist minded congressmen decreed that the post office should print additional misprints when that occurred so that no collector could profit from the errors of the government.

In general Americans have lost interest in collecting antiques, coins, stamps or anything from previous generations. Stamps just seemed to be more impacted than other collectibles.

I inherited my father's mint postage stamps. The market is very weak for them so I decided to use them to mail cards to friends. I try to provide an assortment of stamps on each card to make them more interesting. It is sad that I often use several stamps on a card. In their time, each stamp would have paid the postage for that card. That reflects almost an order of magnitude loss of the purchasing power of the dollar

in our lifetime. The congress continues to fund large budget deficits to fund pork for their district and encourage voters to reelect them to another extravagant term of office.

It is sad that our mint stamps have little value and can only be used up with great effort. I have been using up mint stamps since 2015. It takes me about five or ten minutes to stamp an envelope. I do not use old stamps to mail critical letters to the IRS and the CA tax authority for fear that some collector might grab the envelope. People seem to enjoy seeing the old stamps.

At a recent vintage book fair a stamp dealer said that people want the whole envelope now, not just the stamps., so collectors' goals do change.

I have used up a lot of stamps and as I get to smaller denominations, I seem to use more. There is a limit to how many stamps I can fit on an envelope, so I used to use a modern 22 cent to go with the vintage stamps. Then I switched to using two 13 cent stamps from the state flag series.

I have not visited many stamp shops over the years. There was a street of stamp dealers in NYC near my father's office on Broadway. He loved to go there and browse and buy. He should have invested in stocks instead, but he believed that you had to trade stocks to make money. He must have been brain-washed by a broker earlier in his life. Buy and hold is usually the best strategy unless you are clairvoyant.

So my father's legacy to me was a stamp collection which my grandchildren have no interest in.

If I start selling first day covers, I will use vintage stamps to pay for the postage.

We will look forward to receiving your vintage stamps on your letters.

You may find ways to market your mint stamps that are profitable to you. I decided that my time was worth more than I could recover from ebay.

So that is my saga for stamp collecting. I still have many stamp products to sell on eBay (first day covers, special stamps, etc.)

My stamp collecting memories are similar. It was Aunt Kathy (Mother's Aunt, who I never met in person but would send me First Day Covers) helped to interest me in this hobby. I rode the bus to downtown Houston, went up an elevator to a small office upstairs in the Rusk Bldg on Rusk Ave in Houston and the nice elderly gentleman on the other side of the desk would show me what he had for sale, and recommend this over that. So today I have my collection - what will tomorrow bring? I'll probably be mailing some letters back to Gary! Gary was not the only one of my generation to collect stamps. Ken Gillen adds his story:

## **Stamp collecting- my first bad investment**

My twin brother and I were introduced to stamp collecting in ~1952 by an uncle who lived down the street from us in Cleveland. This uncle, a serious collector for years, suggested we start collecting US mint plate blocks and he sold us each 50 or so recently issued plate blocks at face value. We were hooked by the often beautiful stamps and the fact that we could ask for plate blocks at the post office and usually receive them at face value. It didn't take long before we decided to purchase older plate blocks from stamp dealers using much of our meager weekly allowance. These stamp dealer purchases continued after we moved to California in 1954.

We also started coin collections but our approach here was for the two of us and two coin-collecting friends to go to banks and buy rolls of pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters to look through for decent coins. We would then go back to the bank with the rolls of coins and cash them in for paper money, followed by going to another bank and purchasing more rolls to look through. In the 50s, such an approach would yield many worthwhile coins and often some really valuable ones.

From 1954 through ~1960, the 4 of us probably went through 100s of rolls of pennies, nickels and dimes. My brother specialized in pennies, dimes and quarters whereas I specialized in Buffalo nickels and dimes so the 4 of us negotiated exchanges based on each of our preferences. I obtained more than 100 buffalo nickels for my collection including one of the rarest (it cost me a couple dollars from one of the other 2 collectors), a 1937-D 3-legged buffalo nickel in extra fine condition. I found a 1909-SVDB Lincoln penny (one of the rarest Lincoln pennies) in one bank roll and sold it to my brother for \$1.

This approach that we used successfully to add to our coin collections was inexpensive but a similar approach was unusable for stamp collecting so we were forced to go to stamp dealers and pay retail for older plate blocks. We did start saving part of our increased weekly allowance for other ventures such as for movies. In this instance, however, we came up with a clever way of saving money. I would for instance buy a ticket to a 12 noon movie, watch the movie and then come out the front entrance telling the ticket taker that I had to make a phone call and would be back in a few minutes. I would hand the ticket to Keith who would then go back in and see the next showing for free.

We stopped stamp collecting around 1960 but our dear mother continued to go to the post office every time a new stamp was available and get a plate block for both of us to add to our collections. Over the 8 year period of serious collecting, I probably spent around \$2000 of gift and allowance money on my US plate block collection. When my brother and

went off to college in 1960, my mom took our stamp/coin collections and put each of them in a safety deposit box at a bank, and like most mothers do, she started paying the yearly fee. Finally, when I moved to Albuquerque in 1974, mom requested that I take my collections off her hands (after she paid around \$700 in safety deposit fees over the 14 year period). So I started paying ~\$50/year for a large enough (coins took up much more space than stamps) safety deposit box at the Sandia Labs Federal CU.

About 30 years ago, I determined that much of the stamp collection was not even worth face value to dealers (they would offer 70-80% of face). This was because so many people started collecting stamps based on the observation that FDR was a dedicated stamp collector so there were tons of copies of non-valuable mint stamps available and little demand. So I started using the worthless stamps on our postage. If I needed 22 cents postage, I might put six 3 cents stamps and one 4 cent stamp on the letter. In such an instance, I would always try to use six different 3 cent stamps to make the envelope more interesting and I quite often received compliments from recipients. Several times I would need to mail an envelope at the post office that the postal worker weighed and told me it might require say \$1.53, whereby I would take out this amount from my envelopes containing 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, etc. cent stamps. My personal record was something like 20 stamps and I became somewhat of a legend at the post office. I did this for several years and got rid of many of the totally worthless stamps, but I kept the older and potentially more valuable ones.

Several years ago I determined that no one in either of my daughters' families wanted to inherit the stamps and coins so I decided to get rid of both collections. By checking current wholesale and retail prices in catalogues, I quickly determined that the wholesale price I would get for most of my stamp collection was similar to the retail price I had paid in the 1950s. There were some exceptions. For instance my \$1 presidential plate block from the 1938 presidential series had a decent appreciation but the \$2 and \$5 blocks had done much better. However, those blocks were a bit rich for my budget back in the 50s. After going to several local stamp shows and several dealers, I eventually got rid of ~99% of my stamp collection for a total of around \$2500. Given my original cost in the 50s of ~\$2000, there wasn't a lot of appreciation over a 60 year time period. My coin collection did a bit better since coins in general had shown more appreciation, especially for the more rare ones.

My brother still has both his stamp collection (smaller than mine was) and his coin collection (more extensive than mine was) and hasn't made a

decision on what to do with them. I hope he doesn't leave them to me if he dies before I do!

Finally Dick Jensen completes the reminiscences: